

# Narrative Frames as a Curriculum Assessment Tool: The Storytelling Test

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## **Abstract**

Getting first year students to enjoy speaking in English in class is often challenging. There are several reasons for this. In the Junior College English department, classes are reshuffled in the second semester according to students' achievement test scores. Some students may be placed in the same class along with the friends they made in the first semester. Naturally, if they are not, they may feel shy to speak to an unknown person. In addition, students may not feel confident enough in their English ability to speak freely at any length on a topic. One solution to this problem is what I coined the storytelling test (ST). This paper introduces the ST as a classroom activity used to develop confidence in English speaking ability by giving students the opportunity to learn an English children's story and to retell that story at a later time. In addition, the paper addresses the students' perceptions of the activity and their storytelling ability—data gathered through narrative frames.

## **Introduction**

Everyone loves a good story. If I were to ask, what is your favorite story? A frequent answer may be something by Walt Disney. Children's stories capture the imagination and are easy to remember. They naturally draw the language learners towards them and "...can expose EFL learners

to rich and authentic language which they, otherwise, would not encounter in a foreign language learning context”, (Pathan, 2013, p. 23). Stories have a beginning and ending, main characters and sequence in time, usually with a moral to teach. Oftentimes the lives of the characters parallel our own. We relate to their struggles and triumph in their victories. Hence an emotional connection to the story is made. “Such immersion is a state psychologists call, ‘narrative transport’”, (Hsu, 2008, p. 46). The characters themselves motivate learners and are an excellent source of cultural knowledge. In this study six children’s stories were used in compulsory Speaking & Listening classes ( $N = 2$ ) over the course of second semester 2019. The purpose of this study was to develop confidence in English ability through the practice and use of the ST activity. By the end of the semester students had the opportunity to tell five children’s stories in English. To ensure students’ success, they were given two weeks time to prepare before engaging in the ST.

Storytelling tests are not uncommon in Japan. A different study using the retelling of stories in English was carried out among Japanese learners in Japan, (Hirai and Koizumi, 2009, 2013). Although their study used similar terminology, such as a “retelling test”, their purpose was to measure the students’ speaking ability on the spot. In Hirai and Koizumi’s study students were presented with a story, given time to read it and immediately afterward they were asked to reproduce the story orally from memory in English. Another difference was that their retelling test was done through a language laboratory, where students recorded their voices, and not face to face with a teacher. To be honest, the stories they used were much shorter, averaging 125 words, whereas the ST in my classes averaged 525 words.

The outline of this paper is as follows. First I will share the appropriateness of using storytelling of children’s stories in Speaking & Listening classes. Next I will introduce the ST procedure. Finally, I will detail the narrative frame as a data collection tool and display the outcomes of students’ perceptions regarding their initial and final experiences of storytelling in English, their overall impressions of the ST at the end of the semester and their perceptions of future storytelling ability and confidence in storytelling in English. Table 1 lists six stories used in the five storytelling tests. For the fifth test, students were given a choice of either *The Hungry Caterpillar* or *Papa, Get the Moon*.

**Table 1:** List of children’s stories used in second semester’s storytelling test (ST)

	Title	Word count
1	The Paper Bag Princess <sup>1</sup>	501
2	The Giving Tree <sup>2</sup>	613
3	Ferdinand the Bull <sup>3</sup>	737
4	Charlie & the Chocolate Factory <sup>4</sup>	527
5	The Hungry Caterpillar <sup>5</sup>	248
6	Papa, Get the Moon <sup>6</sup>	526

### The appropriateness of using storytelling of children’s stories in EFL

Slattery and Willis (2014) believe that when it comes to young learners, “stories are the most valuable resource you have.... Stories are first of all for enjoyment”, p. 96-97. They list the educational value of stories as helping learners to, “imagine what it feels to be like someone else” and to “develop thinking skills”. Moreover they claim that in language teaching, stories can “introduce new language in context”, help learners to “become aware of the structures of the language” and to “acquire intonation and pronunciation by listening”, *ibid*. Through the use of short stories, students

can encounter a wide range of words and expand their vocabulary. Isbell et al. (2004) state that, “Storybook reading is one of the most studied formats for increasing language learning in children” and “benefits children in two ways by providing them with acquisition of language and literacy”, p. 158. Furthermore, “telling traditional stories provides children with a model of language and thought that they can imitate”, (*ibid.*, p. 161). Professional storyteller Walsh (2014) claims, “There is magic, beauty, and power in storytelling. By slowing down, pausing, adding face and body to the story, you stimulate imagination and bring life to the characters”, p. 112. Because children’s stories are imaginative and fun they enhance motivation and positive affect among learners. Abuzahra and Farrah (2016) report on the benefits of using short stories in the EFL classroom which include enhancing students’ creativity, imagination and self-esteem and making the learning process interesting. They also found that students believed that the use of short stories in class enriched all, four language skills, in addition to vocabulary.

Many students in Japan are pleased to read children’s stories in English, as they are already familiar with the content, making it easier to decode the text and comprehend the English. With the use of the Internet in the classroom, students can watch the story on YouTube, which also aids in comprehension. An excellent language learner once told me the key to learning a foreign language well is to use the target language to study the content of something you love. Children’s stories are indeed loved by many, young and old. Storytelling teachers, Morgan and Rinvoluceri, advise, “There are no recipes for storytelling, but there are very clearly things one should NOT do: Don’t tell stories you don’t like [and]... Don’t tell [stories] from notes”, (1983, p. 11).

In language classes where students are often shy to speak out, the use of storytelling of children's stories has a unique way to lighten the atmosphere. An innate gift possessed by all, "storytelling is a human skill that builds a bond between storyteller and listeners", Barker and Gower (2010) call it a "communication technique", p. 302. "Storytelling as a communication method", they say, recognizes "all humans as storytellers with the ability to send and receive messages...[which] establishes a common ground among all participants and provides a faster method of establishing a social relationship", *ibid*. Therefore, "storytelling is effective in bringing about a sense of community—that in which listeners can easily understand and find common ground with their fellow listeners", *ibid*, p. 305. Senehi (2002) states, "Storytelling is language. Encompassing vocabulary, grammar rules, norms of communicative behavior, and narrative forms...", p. 43. Nicolas et al. (2011) report that storytelling helps learners to be able to tell stories better, to find their own voice and to increase word power. For these reasons storytelling is an appropriate technique to use in Speaking & Listening classes and enables students to speak in greater detail on a given topic.

## **Background and Participants**

The ST was employed in the Junior College Speaking & Listening classes ( $N = 2$ ). Both first and second year students participated ( $N = 39$ ). Their English ability varied from beginner to intermediate levels. The purpose of the ST was to develop confidence in English speaking ability by giving students the opportunity to learn an English children's story, reconstruct the story and retell it from memory. Because children's stories were used instead of a textbook, other classroom activities also included the writing of and sharing summaries of popular American animation. The

aims of the study were to build confidence in students' speaking ability and to make a positive impact on their future use of English for storytelling.

## Method

Professional Storyteller John Walsh (2014) lists seven tools of storytelling. The first is imagination. He says, "To properly tell a story, you must see it in your mind.... The more you are able to see the story, the less you will feel the need to memorize it," p. 88. More importantly he states, "Your voice is a valuable storytelling tool and key to your success as a communicator", p. 107. Morgan and Rinvoluceri (1983) suggest that, "When students have finished their preparation work...ask them to shut their eyes and mumble the story to themselves in English, prior to telling it to someone else. This produces a much more coherent telling", p. 84. In addition, "Ask the students to tell their story to someone they have not previously worked with", *ibid*. In this section of the paper I will present four self-explanatory tables, which detail various aspects of the ST and its procedure.

**Table 2:** The storytelling test (ST)

Teaching Objectives, Goals, Outcomes and Materials	
1	To improve students' English speaking ability
2	Through the use of multiple storytelling tests ( $N = 5$ ), students will <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• become familiar with the skill of telling stories in English</li> <li>• experience success in telling stories in English</li> <li>• become confident in their ability to tell stories in English</li> <li>• become desirous to continue storytelling in English in the future</li> </ul>
3	Teaching materials <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Print of the children's story and a highlighter</li> <li>• Print of the storytelling frame for reconstruction of the story</li> <li>• The story on YouTube-viewed as a whole class activity (see Notes)</li> <li>• Print of narrative frames of student perception-given in Week 15</li> </ul>

**Table 3:** Introducing ST materials in class meeting A

Class 1: Introducing the Storytelling Test	Time: 60 minutes
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1 Watch the story on YouTube.</li> <li>2 Listen and follow along as the teacher reads the story. Highlight any unknown words.</li> <li>3 Work with a partner to identify the unknown words.</li> <li>4 Teacher conducts whole class check of unknown words via Google images.</li> <li>5 In pairs, students take turns to read the story aloud, alternating the lines.</li> <li>6 Students reconstruct the story with use of transitions on the 6-frame storytelling print.</li> <li>7 Teacher circulates the room to individually check the grammar of each one's story.</li> </ol>	

*Note.* Students who cannot finish during class time will complete it as homework.

**Table 4:** The ST practice in class meeting B

Class 2: Practicing the Storytelling Test	Time: 30 minutes
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1 Teacher checks that the stories completed as homework have been written properly.</li> <li>2 In pairs, students read aloud their stories for three rounds. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>❖ Round 1: Students are permitted to rely on their 6-frame storytelling print to tell the story.</li> <li>❖ Round 2: Students try and tell the story by heart; but can glance at their print if necessary.</li> <li>❖ Round 3: Students give their print to their partner and retell their story by heart.</li> </ul> </li> <li>3 Teacher informs students of the storytelling test to be held individually with her in two weeks.</li> </ol>	

**Table 5:** Giving the ST after two weeks

Class 3: The Storytelling Test Procedure	Time: 60 minutes
1	Students come individually to a corner of the room when they are ready to take the test.
2	Upon sitting down, they hand their storytelling print to the teacher.
3	Teacher listens and writes feedback on their print, handing it back to the student when the test is complete.
4	A class of up to twenty-three students can be tested during one class period.

*Note.* Other class assignments are given in advance for students who finish the test early.

### **Performance rating**

The purpose of the ST is to provide meaningful opportunities for students to speak on a topic in order to build confidence in telling a story in English and to draw from that confidence in future storytelling episodes. Slattery and Willis (2001) point out that in the retelling of a story, the learners “will become more familiar with the language of the story and will be able to participate more”, p. 104. Hung’s (2019) research results of EFL students who engaged in storytelling showed that students were cognitively engaged in tasks such as, organizing, remembering, planning and monitoring which led to meaningful learning. The National Institute of Educational Policy Research of Japan (2007) found speaking performance was linked to the number of opportunities to practice speaking and having speaking performances evaluated, suggesting the benefits of testing frequently (as cited in Hirai & Koizumi, 2009).

In the current study, the ST was worth 30% of students’ grades or (6%) per story. Because the purpose of the test was to build confidence and ensure a successful speaking experience, all students passed the tests. If however a student could not remember the story, they were given more



time to prepare and to try again at the end of the class or in the next class session. That only occurred a few times. Based on the purpose of the ST, I noted the following elements of a story when providing feedback to students on their performance: their use of discourse markers; their story had a beginning and end; their use of gestures, smile, intonation, pronunciation, good memory and/or fluency, as these aspects “enhance the experience of telling or listening to a story”, (Wells, 2011, p. 33). I reinforced whichever aspect was their strongest point(s) in my comments, which were written down on their storytelling frame during their test and then handed back to them immediately upon test completion. Talandis (2017) states that it is very important to give immediate feedback on speaking tests as it provides a boost to “positive washback” as the tests themselves are “learning activities”, p. 70, 73.

### **Narrative Frames as a Curriculum Assessment Tool**

The latter part of this paper reports on the analysis of narrative frames of student perspectives regarding the ST. A narrative frame is a research tool crafted by the researcher in order to guarantee that the participants of the study will write about the same topic. Designed with the important ideas of the study in mind, it allows for participant responses to be both collected and compared. The narrative frame is comprised of a sentence structure with intentional blank spaces interspersed within, enabling participants to freely insert their own thoughts. Barkhuizen (2014), who coined the idea of narrative frames, describes them as, “a written story template consisting of a series of incomplete sentences and blank spaces of varying lengths”, p. 13. Through the use of narrative frames, the researcher can both control the amount of data that is generated and gather the kind of information that is important to the study. In language

teaching and learning, narrative frames have been used to learn more about both teachers (Barkhuizen & Wette, 2008; Wette & Barkhuizen, 2009) and learners (Millikan, 2019; see also Hiratsuka, 2018; Macalister, 2012).

## Results and Discussion

The data presented in tables six through nine were collected voluntarily from students via a narrative frame on the final day of classes (see Appendix) and permission was granted for use in this paper. The data derived from the narrative frames were then assorted thematically. By noting the frequencies of comments, the most pressing thoughts of students' minds are disclosed. Students recalled the initial storytelling test as challenging, describing it as "difficult". Regarding performance, remembering and telling the story were difficult. Negative emotions associated with their experience were felt.

**Table 6:** Assessment of the initial experience taking the ST ( $N = 33$ )

Themes	Details of themes	Frequency
Test impression	Difficult	9
	A little difficult	2
	Very easy	1
	Total	(12)
Performance	Difficult to remember	4
	Difficult to tell	3
	Total	(7)
Emotions	Nervous	6
	Unhappy	1
	Total	(7)

Story/Characters	Interesting	3
	Strong girl	2
	Very funny	1
	Very cute	1
	Total	(7)

**Table 7:** Assessment of the final experience taking the ST ( $N = 33$ )

Themes	Details of themes	Frequency
Emotions	Fun	7
	Happy	4
	Enjoy	2
	Confidence	2
	Relaxed	1
	So good	1
	Total	(17)
Performance	Could tell the story	3
	Perfectly done / well done	2
	Learned using gestures	1
	Storytelling became smoother	1
	Difficult to tell seeing the teacher's eyes	1
	Total	(8)
Test impression	Easy	3
	Lil bit difficult	2
	Just right level	1
	Not difficult	1
	Total	(7)
Story/Characters	Strong	1
	Funny	1
	Cute	1
	Fantasy	1
	Total	(4)

*Note.* Any one response could contain more than one detail, so the total of frequencies do not add up to 33.

Table 7 represents students' perception at the final storytelling test. Positive emotions relating to the experience are felt. Test performance has generally increased and the difficulty of the test has diminished. The impression of the characters remains in the minds of students. The following table represents students' overall impression of the storytelling test curriculum at the end of second semester.

**Table 8:** Overall assessment of the ST curriculum ( $N = 33$ )

Themes	Details of themes	Frequency
Emotions	Fun / very fun	5
	Interesting	4
	Had a good time	2
	Like the books	1
	Thankful	1
	Total	(13)
Change / Growth	Became a good experience	2
	Want to read more books	2
	Improve both writing and speaking skills	1
	Could read even a long story	1
	Got the skill to tell a story	1
	First time to see the story of a foreign child	1
	Had the power to summarize the story	1
	Can tell the story in my own way	1
	Will tell storytelling for my baby	1
	Level up	1
Total	(12)	
Test Value	Good / very good for me	6
	Most important skill	1
	Very important	1
	Very useful for me	1
	Good experience	1
	Good class	1
	Total	(11)
Learning English	Good way to study English	2
	Good way to learn speaking English	1
	Speak English using gestures	1

Good opportunity to read a little child's book	1
Good way to understand the story	1
Total	(6)

*Note.* Any one response could contain more than one detail, so the total of frequencies do not add up to 33.

At the end of the course, students' perception of the storytelling test, which accounted for 30% of their grade, was 100% positive. As negative comments were not present among the data. The storytelling test curriculum impacted every student in a positive way, resulting in the mention of positive changes and growth. Students placed great value on the experience as it affected their ability to learn English better. The following Table 9 represents students' history with storytelling as well as their perceived abilities and confidence to do storytelling in English.

**Table 9:** Perceptions of storytelling ability and storytelling confidence ( $N = 33$ )

Narrative frame	Choice	Frequency
Before taking this class I <u>usually / sometimes / never</u> read children's stories in English.		3 / 22 / 4
I also <u>usually / sometimes / never</u> told a story in English like we did in the class.		4 / 17 / 8
But after taking this class I think I <u>can / cannot</u> tell a children's story in English.		25 / 2
I think I <u>do / don't have</u> confidence in storytelling in English.		24 / 3

*Note.* A few students did not answer this part, so the total of frequencies do not add up to 33.

## Conclusion

The aims of the study were to build confidence in students' speaking ability and to make a positive impact on their future use of English for

storytelling. The narrative frame data were collected on the final day of classes. After experiencing the storytelling tests, the majority of students believe that they can tell a children's story in English. In addition, they believe that they have confidence to do so. Isbell et al. (2004) related that it was the children who participated in storytelling, meaning that they listened to the story rather than just reading it, who out-performed their classmates in both the memory of characters and the understanding of story elements. In Speaking & Listening classes students did more than reading or listening to stories, they also crafted the story in their own words and retold it in the ST. Nicolas et al. (2011) found that by giving chances to students to write down the story before retelling it provided them more time "to organize their thoughts and find appropriate vocabulary", p. 257. Yazdanpanah (2012) reported that the teaching of story structures to students enabled them to develop their narrative ability and gain a sense of achievement. Along with the findings of Hung (2019), Junior College students also became more familiar with the language of stories, which made them able to participate more. Unlike standard "retelling tests", the storytelling test was delayed by two weeks, giving ample time for students to prepare. Through multiple retellings of stories through the ST, students were able to gain valuable speaking skills and progress in their language ability. Because they created their original version of the story it gave them ownership of the language. In the end they believed that meaningful learning had occurred.

The use of children's stories in the EFL classroom is not only a motivating resource, it is through the process of storytelling in English that the reinforcement of success occurs, which then contributes to a sense of confidence in one's ability to use English in the future. Students were given a choice between two stories for the fifth test, which they later wrote

from memory on their semester-end test. In their comments describing why they chose that story one student wrote: “Because I love this story. It’s very fun. Caterpillar is so cute. Also it is easy to learn. I want to read again and again. I love it.” Another wrote: “Cause like me. I eat a lot of food recently. So it seemed to be writing about me. I might be as beautiful as that caterpillar.”

By use of narrative frames the perceptions of students regarding the storytelling test were understood. As such, narrative frames became a useful tool to evaluate course curriculum from the viewpoint of students. Because of their positive assessment I will continue to use storytelling tests in the future with beginning and intermediate level students. In the end, when asked what was their favorite children’s story, the greatest response given was for *The Giving Tree*, followed by *Ferdinand the Bull* and in third place was *The Paperbag Princess*.

### Notes

- 1 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sCobkTDLNTc>
- 2 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1TZCP6OqRIE>
- 3 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UN62cxSs5Q8>
- 4 [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=791CWHOkekg&list=PLZ-F4pjbka7EIKKAwh83RDqi7Vp0q\\_DQp](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=791CWHOkekg&list=PLZ-F4pjbka7EIKKAwh83RDqi7Vp0q_DQp)
- 5 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=75NqK-Sm1YY>
- 6 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sGqAw7UM6qo&t=59s>

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## Appendix

Example of a storytelling test and narrative frame.







# Retelling Charlie & the Chocolate Factory

There

He likes

was. His life

<p>1 Once upon a time... There was a little boy whose name is Charlie </p>	<p>2 He likes chocolate! But his family was poor. </p> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>Then</b></p>	<p>3 His life extremely uncomfortable because his father was the only person in the family with the job <b>SO</b></p> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>NEXT</b></p>
<p>4 There wasn't even enough money to buy proper food for them all. </p> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>And</b></p>	<p>5 There is horrible empty feeling in their tummies.</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>Finally</b></p>	<p>6 He wants chocolate anything else. </p> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>more then</b></p>

There wasn't

There is a

He wants

Next...  
Surprisingly...  
\_\_\_\_\_

Immediately...  
Finally...  
In the end...  
Eventually...  
\_\_\_\_\_

On the next day...  
Suddenly...  
All of a sudden...  
Unexpectedly...  
\_\_\_\_\_

Years went by...  
Months went by...  
Days went by...  
Then...  
\_\_\_\_\_

One day...  
Once upon a time...  
After that...  
Time went by...  
\_\_\_\_\_

(Love Charlie!)  
 The words you use  
 don't matter  
 and remember  
 to add in to narrative

Storytelling Activity Survey

January 8, 2020

In **Listening & Speaking** I read English children's stories, for example, papa, Get the moon for me, The Hungry Cat of pillar and Charlie & the Chocolate Factory.

My favorite story was papa, Get the moon for me.

I liked this story because I have been loved this story since I was a child. The main character in this story was papa and Monica.

Before taking this class, I usually / sometimes / never read children's stories in English. I also usually / sometimes / never told a story in English like we did in the class. But after taking this class I think can / cannot tell a children's story in English. I think I do / don't have confidence in storytelling in English. For example, the first time to tell the story, I felt it was too hard to remember it but the final time to tell the story I felt I can tell the story with confidence.

Overall the storytelling activity was very good for me.

